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## **"Only the Wall Put a Stop to the Inflow of Monsters": Bodies and Borders in Post-Wall Berlin**

### **Abstract**

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### **Keywords**

Flesh and Stone, Richard Sennett, urban space, urbane, body, bodies, border, borders, self-perception

"Only the Wall Put a Stop to the Inflow of Monsters":  
Bodies and Borders in Post-Wall Berlin

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In the dual-centered city, people knew incompleteness in their bodily experiences.

—Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone* (371)

In his seminal study *Flesh and Stone*, Richard Sennett showed that urban space is significantly shaped through the ways in which humans perceive their bodies. As people recognized the importance of unobstructed circulation and the unhindered exchange of intake and waste products, for instance, they applied these insights to the design of their cities, replacing cramped quarters and open gutters with traffic arteries and sewage systems. The cleared urban space, in turn, facilitated the movement of bodies through the city. Literature is one arena in which the literal, symbolic, and metaphorical interconnections between city and body are made productive. Since the nineteenth century, city writers have privileged the figure of the flaneur—the individual city dweller moving through the city with no other purpose but to observe it—to imagine this relationship. Literature set in post-unification Berlin continues to use body imagery to assess the changes in the wake of the fall of the wall that have fascinated locals and visitors alike; not surprisingly, the flaneur as a literary device has made a comeback in recent Berlin writing.<sup>1</sup>

The epigraph from Sennett's *Flesh and Stone* refers to the geography of the ancient Greek city. Yet Berlin's divided nature as well has been rendered as a physical injury whose pain radiates out to the human bodies traveling through the city. Richard Wagner's Berlin poem "The Divided Time" is a case in point when the protagonist follows the example of the city: "Carefully you join/your head/together again. /You become whole/like the city" (Wagner 86).<sup>2</sup> In Peter Schneider's novel *Eduards Heimkehr* the main character perceives the construction site at Potsdamer Platz as a "giant operating table" installed to perform open-heart surgery on the body of the city (Schneider 273);<sup>3</sup> and in numerous texts the physicality of unification is emphasized by describing this political occurrence as an often violent sexual act.<sup>4</sup> This essay is concerned with a particular manifestation of the continuing interest in bodies and cities. More specifically, it offers analyses of the literary and artistic renditions of the various anatomical-pathological collections in Berlin, most importantly the Medizinhistorisches Museum in the Charité with its displays of misshapen fetuses and diseased organs. The presence of these de-figured bodies in a city whose own abnormal body has become the focus of intense scrutiny has inspired several writers and artists in the 1990s to explore Berlin in light of these extremes. Founded in 1898 by the pathologist Rudolf Virchow, the Medizinhistorisches Museum reopened its doors to the public in 1998 amidst a surge of publicity. Almost all texts under consideration here focus on this or similar collections as urban institutions and as museums with histories of their own. The deformed bodies in their display jars are a point of departure for reflections on history, representation as well as self-representation of the city. Most importantly, the literary and artistic renditions of these collections raise questions of normality and the abnormal in the context of post-unification Berlin. Extraordinary bodies, in the words of Elizabeth Grosz (55), provoke both horror and fascination. What is more, they probe the limits of identity and subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> The "monstrous births" housed in the center of Berlin serve to probe the boundaries of the "normal" in a city that has to come to terms with both the existence and the loss of a border that

rendered it ab-normal for forty years. For some writers, the displays evoke Nazi crimes and the annihilation of life deemed deviant, relating the fascination with monstrosities to Germany's "monstrous" history. Others examine East Berlin, where these collections are or were housed, in terms of normality and aberration. Yet others imagine a more humane united Berlin by liberating the malformed fetuses from the confines of their jars and the museum. Rosemary Garland Thomson has argued that "singular bodies become politicized when culture maps its concerns upon them as meditations on individual as well as national values, identity, and direction" (Thomson 2).<sup>5</sup> Here, writers have looked to extraordinary bodies to interpret Berlin as a city of border and boundary formations. The question that needs to be asked is how different bodies are placed in relation to these borders and what kind of identities and subjectivities emerge as the city, in Richard Wagner's phrase, becomes "whole."

The relationship between cities and bodies as a measure of society has been subject to philosophical scrutiny since the emergence of the modern city in the nineteenth century. In his 1853 study *Ästhetik des Häßlichen* the German philosopher Karl Rosenkranz maintained that the physical and moral ugliness of the great metropolises of the nineteenth century could be observed on the bodies of their inhabitants.<sup>6</sup> "Big cities like London, Paris, Berlin," he remarked, "ape themselves" in the physical features of their lower classes (Rosenkranz, *Ästhetik* 331). According to Rosenkranz, who was a knowledgeable admirer of great cities as much as an ardent critic of the social problems they created, cities and the bodies of those who populate them mirrored each other in distorted yet revealing images (Rosenkranz, *Ästhetik* 331). Interestingly, Rosenkranz drew on works of art to emphasize the effects of the metropolis on the bodies of its residents. The proletariat of the city of London, for example, is made up "almost exclusively of caricatures, and these caricatures consist almost exclusively of grimaces that possess the peculiarly sensuous trait which so disgusts us in the distorted images by Cruikshank."<sup>7</sup> In viewing the objects of representation through the drawings created by his contemporary George Cruikshank

(1792-1878), Rosenkranz confirmed the authority of art as he condemned the realities he observed in the city. The artistic representation of the ugly human body served Rosenkranz, who wanted his study to be read as a complement to Hegel's aesthetics, as shorthand for the vicissitudes of the modern city.

If the human body was distorted by the city, Rosenkranz conceived of the metropolis in organic terms, blurring the boundaries between physical and social bodies:

The swamp water in city ditches, where the refuse from the gutters collects, where plant and animal scraps of all kinds mix together with rags and other splinters of cultural decay (Kulturverwesungsabschnitzeln) into a dreadful amalgamation, is also highly disgusting. If one could turn a big city, like Paris, upside down so that the underside came on top . . . this would be a terribly disgusting image (253).

Drawing on aesthetic, moral, and social categories, Rosenkranz's *Ästhetik* is a critique of modernity and the social transformations that accompanied the population shift from the countryside to the cities. The nightmarish vision of a Paris turned up-side down bespeaks fears of decay and self-contamination. Rosenkranz's horror of the "dreadful amalgamation" of "Kulturverwesungsabschnitzeln" points ahead to Julia Kristeva's discovery of the "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" as the source of abjection (Kristeva 4). Where Rosenkranz had identified class as the determining factor that bound together body and city, for the Berlin writers of the 1990s the deformed body raises issues of individuality, ethics, and difference. In evoking a nineteenth-century topos at the verge of the twenty-first century, these writers engage with the history of the city itself as much as with the history of city discourse and city writing. While the interest in the postmodern fragmentation of the human body provides the general context, the texts under discussion here draw on the deformed body to write about a city that is still very much preoccupied with the national as it must confront the challenges of the global.

The connection between the city as body and the bodies of those who inhabit it suggested by Rosenkranz in the nineteenth century finds various continuations in the twentieth century. In

the early decades of the twentieth century the expressionists developed a poetic and visual imagery of the city as a monster eager to devour its human victims.<sup>8</sup> In these works of art, the city figures as a living entity that is limitless, insatiable, and violent. "Never are we tired, never are we sated," the expressionist Armin Wegner wrote in a poem titled "The Procession of Houses" (qtd. in Vietta and Kemper 37). The anthropomorphous houses to which this line refers threaten the human being with their more than human capabilities. Seeking to reclaim mankind's humanity against the onslaught of urbanization and technology, the expressionists identified the city as the most challenging manifestation of modern civilization. The image of the city as organism finds its continuation in the classic city novels by Alfred Döblin, Martin Beradt and Irmgard Keun. Yet unlike the expressionists, these writers did not reject the city as voracious monster. More than mere background setting, the city gained its own aesthetics of speed, facades, and crowds. It is no coincidence that Walter Benjamin welcomed the return of the flaneur at the same time when Döblin, Beradt, and Keun published their *Stadtramane*. Here, too, changing notions of the body change the description of the city. In *Berlin Alexanderplatz* the city emerges as protagonist as the individual loses himself in its streets and buildings; Keun's *Kunstseidenes Mädchen* shows a gendered geography of Berlin as her female protagonist negotiates the city's streets; *Die Strasse der kleinen Ewigkeit*, Martin Beradt's story of a "Jewish" street, explores notions of ethnic difference and sameness in pre-Nazi Berlin. The bodies of its inhabitants, each with a gender and a race, shape the city that is being narrated.

In 1992, the politically left publishing house Merve brought out a volume titled *Periphere Museen in Berlin* (Glasmeier). Two of the essays introduce museums that display abnormal bodies. One deals with the Berliner Panoptikum, successor to Castans Panoptikum and located in Westberlin's Ku'damm-Eck. Titled "Panische Optiken," the article on the Berliner Panoptikum describes an institution whose time has long passed. A contemporary audience, the authors argue, has lost the ability to be awe-inspired by the lifelikeness of the wax figures. Only the

“Medizinisches Kabinett” with its wax replicas of diseased, maimed and malformed organs can make us forget the difference between reality and wax and afford us a glimpse into the pleasures a trip to the panopticon held for the nineteenth-century visitor. In the other piece Dresden-born poet and essayist Durs Grünbein mourns the loss of the “Gurltsche Mißbildungssammlung” (Gurlt’s Collection of Malformations), a zoological collection dating back to the late eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Both essays reflect on the history of abnormal bodies in the imagination of Berlin and the changing fates of these collections. In the introduction to *Periphere Museen* the editor insists that the twenty or so museums included in this book seek to maintain their counter-cultural vis-à-vis against Berlin’s official museums, inviting encounters with the unexpected which the mainstream museums cannot offer. Berlin’s marginal museums are interpreted in light of the city’s transitional state in the early 1990s, indicating that some of them might well fall victim to the unification process. The essays are thus offered as attempts to preserve in writing the legacy of institutions that might not survive otherwise despite the fact that their primary mission is to protect their content against oblivion. The Berliner Panoptikum closed its doors in 1997.

The end of the panopticon and its particular display of bodies arrived long before the Berliner Panoptikum sought to recapture the thrill. Wilhelmine Berlin featured two panopticons, located in close proximity to one another on Friedrichstrasse: Castans Panoptikum, founded in 1873 by Louis Castan, and the Passage-Panoptikum, founded in 1888 and named after its location in the Linden-Passage.<sup>10</sup> Part wax figure collection, part anatomical cabinet, these popular institutions also entertained Berliners by putting on display exotic people or people with physical deformities. The panopticons’ live exhibits were regularly examined by researchers like Rudolf Virchow and his colleagues, indicating that science and entertainment were not mutually exclusive in turn-of-the-century Berlin. The Passage-Panoptikum, in turn, featured a wax bust of Rudolf Virchow.<sup>11</sup> In a piece about the Passage-Panoptikum titled “Geheimkabinett des Anatomischen



Museums" (Secret Cabinet of the Anatomical Museum) Egon Erwin Kisch satirically exposed the desire to view human bodies and body parts as voyeuristic and driven by sexual curiosity. Predictably, the secret cabinet that gives the piece its title is dedicated to human sexuality "from conception to the normal, breech or forceps delivery," frequented by adolescents of both sexes (173). Kisch reinforces the sexualized atmosphere of the Panoptikum by reminding the reader of the nearby bookstores catering to a homosexual clientele and their potential customers lingering about in the famous Linden-Passage. At the same time, he also mourns a loss. Much as Franz Kafka's hunger artist had lost his audience to the young tiger that now inhabits his cage, the visitors of the Panoptikum ignore the faded photographs on the walls of Siamese twins, bearded ladies, and of several different people dubbed "tallest human being ever alive." These "celebrities of yesteryear," who once performed live in the Panoptikum, have lost their appeal and Kisch knows that his plea to look at the yellowing photographs, addressed to a new generation of visitors who came to see sexual organs modeled in wax, will probably go unheeded. "Nothing is left of them except perhaps a preparation in some pathological-anatomical clinic—and this yellowed Valhalla in the entry hall of the Passagepanoptikum" (171-72).<sup>12</sup> The demise of the sideshow, Kisch insists, did not restore the dignity of those exhibited. Displaced by different delights, their fading pictures attest to the fast changes characteristic of modernity. Castans Panoptikum went out of business shortly after Kisch wrote this essay. The critic Arthur Eloesser attributed its closing in 1922 to the rise of cinema, whose moving bodies quickly superseded the thrills the wax figure cabinet's static displays could offer. Joseph Roth made a similar argument a year later when the Passage-Panoptikum had to close its doors (Bienert 192). A nineteenth-century institution, the Panoptikum lost its audience to a twentieth-century medium. The human curiosities fell out of favor even earlier, their final resting place in a pathological collection stripping them of the temporary fame the Panoptikum had afforded them.

Dedicated to science and without the popular appeal of the Panoptikum, the Gurltsche Mißbildungssammlung, the topic of Durs Grünbein's essay "Im Museum der Mißbildungen," was housed at Berlin's Friedrich Wilhelm University until its destruction by allied bombs in World War II. Dating back to the late eighteenth century, this unique zoological collection encompassed more than 10,000 exhibits in its prime. The loss Grünbein mourns, however, is more than the physical destruction of World War II. The physical demolition was followed by an ideologically motivated annihilation in the early 1960s when the remnants of the collection were discarded by East German officials in order to make way for "Marxist-Leninist writing chambers" (225). For Grünbein, the limitations of the GDR-academy become particularly clear in contrast with the richness of nineteenth-century science, to which the growing collection owed its existence, and its desire for encompassing systems that assigned a position to every natural occurrence. The GDR is found guilty of sacrificing a heritage to its ideology, a heritage that united Berlin has no way of retrieving. In the post-Shoah age, Grünbein also mourns the loss of scientific innocence. The fate of the collection's remnants resembles, as noted above, that of Kafka's hunger artist, relegated to some distant corner, its former significance forgotten. While the *Sammlung* occupied a leading position among Berlin's scientific collections, the monsters of the future, born out of atomic catastrophes and genetic manipulation, will have no museum in Berlin or elsewhere. Like Eloesser and Roth before him, Grünbein argues that film will displace the "klassische Mißgeburt" with its special effects. Among the earliest post-wall texts about deformed bodies, Grünbein links a national past, represented by Goethe as well as Buchenwald, to a transnational (and apocalyptic) future of gene-manipulated monsters. Grünbein, whom many consider one of the most important writers of the new Germany, has repeatedly used anatomical metaphors for Germany's division and the subsequent unification process (Ryan 302). In his essay "Transit Berlin," for example, he writes of a "geographical-political-anatomical fissure" that extended from the city of Berlin to the minds and bodies of those who lived in divided Germany. For

Grünbein, the loss of the Gurltsche Mißbildungssammlung is the sacrifice of historical consciousness to ideology. Its steady increase in categorized and catalogued bodies endowed the Sammlung itself with an organic quality, their destruction and dispersal widening the fracture that ran through the anatomy of Berlin. Grünbein is careful not to equate the Mißbildungen in the museum with the injuries suffered by Berlin, nor does he celebrate the nineteenth century with its impulse to collect, to compare, and to categorize as an age of innocence. Yet he takes from it the notion of pathology and associates it with the history of the city. The sense of loss that accompanies the renewed fascination with sensationalist nineteenth-century cultural practices is, perhaps, the insight that the thrills of 1990s Berlin will fade even faster than those of the nineteenth century.

Berlin's most famous pathological collection is the Berliner Medizinhistorisches Museum der Charité.<sup>13</sup> It owes its existence to Rudolf Virchow, pathologist at the Charité until his death in 1902, and the immense energy he invested in the preservation of pathological organs and fetuses.<sup>14</sup> Under his leadership, the collection, which he opened to the public as a museum on the grounds of the Charité in 1899, grew to almost 24,000 items (Krietsch and Simon). Indebted to the principles of the nineteenth-century museum, he aspired to comprehensiveness, putting on view as many items as possible in densely filled display cases. While the education of the general public was one of his concerns, Virchow's primary aim was to provide physicians with specimens of various pathologies (Virchow 5).<sup>15</sup> During his opening speech, Virchow spoke extensively about his *monstra* collection but he did not make this part of the museum open to the public. Today, the fetuses with two heads, one eye, or missing lower extremities are among the first exhibits the visitor encounters. During World War II, the majority of Virchow's preparations were destroyed in an air raid. Unlike the Gurltsche Mißbildungssammlung, however, Virchow's collection fared quite well under East German administration. It swelled to about 7000 items and was made accessible to visitors again in 1980. Peter Krietsch, custodian of the collection until his death in 1999, publicized it in articles

and books. In particular after the fall of the wall the *monstra* collection and its history, which dates back to the eighteenth century, were emphasized in text and image (Krietsch and Dietel).<sup>16</sup> In the mid-1990s, the exhibition space was rented out for cultural events as part of a fundraising effort to benefit the museum ("Party"). When the museum reopened in March 1998, virtually all newspaper articles reporting on the event featured photographs of fetuses in jars. An exhibition about the Humboldt University in the renowned Martin-Gropius-Bau in 2001 featured a reconstruction of Virchow's office replete with items from his vast collection of pathological-anatomical preparations, including examples of his most famous specimens, the abnormal human fetuses and babies.<sup>17</sup> Michael Hagner, who has written extensively on such collections, has argued: "The definition of monstrosities and their treatment in different times and in different cultural locations is a fine seismograph for historical development as well as development gone awry" (Polzin 29). In this particular context, the Medizinhistorisches Museum is the "cultural location" that provides the interpretative framework. Officially, it serves to document Berlin's long history as a center of science and learning. Since the displays are arranged in the original fashion but for the most part no longer serve their original teaching purpose, the resulting exhibition is the museum of a museum that fails to reflect its own history. The use of the deformed embryos as a means of self-promotion is a reminder of the museum's roots in nineteenth-century science and indicates that the linkage between researchers like Rudolf Virchow and the Panoptikum displays of exotic people still haunts us.

Contemporary writers have looked to Virchow's collection to probe boundaries of various kinds in a city that continues to be defined by the border that ran through it for forty years. The fetuses preserved in alcohol point to the limits of the viable. The limbless bodies and their excessively-limbed counterparts shock with their lack or surplus. Critics like Elizabeth Grosz have emphasized that these "borderline cases" are "simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive" (Grosz 56). This borderline position seems to be what is most intriguing to writers, al-

lowing them to create extreme situations and scenarios which the museum grounds in a certain degree of reality. Beyond the sensationalism to which the museum caters despite various claims to scientific value, Virchow's collection serves to assess Berlin after 1989 as a city that has lost its defining border but continues to reflect its meaning. At least one writer exposes the self-promotion of the museum as symptomatic of Berlin's overall efforts to reinvent itself as Germany's most exciting city. In the following section I discuss texts and art work that refer directly or indirectly to the museum and its collection: The decisive scenes of Thomas Hettche's 1995 novel *Nox* about the fall of the Berlin Wall are set in the Charité. Novelists Tanja Dückers and Katja Lange-Müller, the former a West Berliner, the latter an East Berliner and more than 15 years older than Dückers, have created figures who are confronted with a severely deformed, un-viable twin. Stephan Porombka satirizes Berlin's need to market itself through a never-ending series of "events" in his short story "Das Blutwunder von Mitte," whose central character is a severed leg preserved in alcohol that performs miracles from its jar in the Charité.<sup>18</sup> Sander Gilman's 1997 volume *Abgetrieben* features a collection of essays, stories and art work that read the Virchow museum through the Shoah; and Volker März' 2002-exhibition "Der Mensch ist, was ihm fehlt" offers a reinterpretation of the museum displays. The eerie presence of the deformed fetuses in the center of Berlin is a reminder of the unstable nature of the normality to which Berlin now aspires.

Set during the night of 9 November 1989, Thomas Hettche's 1995 novel *Nox* reads the opening of the wall not as a historical event but as an extreme physical experience steeped in sado-masochistic violence. The narrator, a young writer-in-residence in an institution very closely resembling the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin at Wannsee is pursued by an enigmatic woman, who wants to know after his public reading if he can really hurt a woman as much as he claims to be able to in the text he has just read. We never find out about the writer's ability to transform his art into life because the woman, who remains nameless throughout the

novel, slits his throat with a knife, presumably during a sexual encounter. Probing the limits of the idea of the omniscient narrator, the writer's mind follows the murderess on her way through Berlin during the night of 9 November as his body undergoes the successive stages of physical decay.

*Nox* reinterprets the fall of the Wall as a psycho-pathology of individual pain rather than an experience of collective joy. The body serves as the novel's central and encompassing metaphor. The Wall, for instance, becomes Berlin's "spine of stone" (80), the abandoned areas surrounding it are "scar tissue" (90); its fall is the bursting open of a scar. The city's pain merges with that of the protagonists, among them a young East Berliner with a body mutilated by deep scars, as they chart their itineraries during the night. The decomposing narrator's privileged insight into the city's subjectivity interweaves the stories of two bodies:

The corneas had already turned cloudy, the eye balls had dried up, and my pupils lay sightless and dull in the eye sockets. . . . And I heard how the city was dreaming. . . . The pain was burning in the city's body and in its sleep the eyes flinched behind closed lids while the ship slowly glided further and further into it. (79-80)

The writer's ability to speak for the feminized city beyond his own death reveals Hettche's scenario to be as much a male fantasy as a literary one.

The novel's postmodern imagery of city and body is juxtaposed with a historical relationship between Berlin and the abnormal bodies that have made their way into the city. Through the Charité-scenes, the fictional story inserted into the events of November 9 is connected to historical origins that precede the city's division by more than a century. On the day of the fall of the Wall, we follow Professor Matern, a pathologist at the Charité and in charge of Rudolf Virchow's preparations, as he leads a group of students through the museum's collection.<sup>19</sup> Matern wants to be the next Rudolf Virchow, so much so that he sports a dog skeleton in his office just like his predecessor. Unlike Virchow's canine, the animal on Matern's desk used to be a watch dog at the Berlin Wall. The border, which was immediately behind the Charité along



the river Spree, yields material for anatomical preparations, suggesting a close relationship between the museum as a home to borderline phenomena and the Berlin Wall. The "Monstra," the deformed fetuses, Professor Matern tells his visitors, came to Berlin in a steady stream from the East: "And the city never stopped taking them in. Like everything else. . . . Only the Wall put a stop to the inflow of monsters" (85-86). And, the lecture continues: "The Wall was the incision with which the city cut itself off from the East" (86). The opening of the Wall, we can assume, will reopen the city to a renewed influx of monsters and "everything else." Matern's identification with Virchow—he likes to imagine himself as part of a nineteenth-century photograph of a road in Virchow's Pomeranian hometown Schivelbein leading "straight . . . to Berlin" (84)—connects the present to the early nineteenth century and Berlin to Prussia's Eastern provinces. This interpretation of the "East" as a source of both monstrous births and the science embodied in figures like Rudolf Virchow recreates geographic and historical contexts that precede Germany's division by more than a century.<sup>20</sup> That these connections should reappear as soon as the Wall opens suggests that Hettche, to whom critic Jörg Magenau has ascribed "a good instinct for the fashionable," seeks to integrate his postmodern entanglements of bodies and Berlin into a larger historical context (Magenau 70).<sup>21</sup>

The fall of the Wall turns the Charité into a center of monstrous exchanges of a different kind. For the evening of 9 November, Professor Matern has an appointment with a film maker from West Berlin who is seeking to take cans of film found in the Charité from East to West Berlin. The film footage, which contains images of decaying bodies in zinc tubs, is presumably a documentation of Nazi experiments on humans performed in the Charité. Together with thousands of East Berliners, these images find their way across the border to West Berlin. The novel leaves open the possible relationships between Virchow's preparations and the Nazi documents, but film footage of medical experiments on humans does exist. The transfer of these monstrous images out of the Charité will not make them go away.

In the end, all protagonists—with the exception of the decomposing narrator—meet up in the Charité's Anatomical Theatre where Virchow and his colleagues used to deliver their lectures and perform their autopsies, the original instruments still in the drawers of the metal dissection table. Professor Matern oversees the sado-masochistic ritual enacted by West and East Berliners that forms the novel's climax, the eerie scene being lit by the headlights of the cars crossing the border at nearby Lehrter Bahnhof (131). Confined in their jars, Virchow's "monstra" are forced to witness the monstrous affair that is German unification, acted out on bodies and by bodies whose aim it seems to be to outdo the malformed fetuses and their extreme physicality. With the fall of the Wall the Charité reoccupies its location in the center of that scarred body that is Berlin. The different roads leading from Virchow's sleepy Pomeranian hometown to Nazi medical experiments and German unification intersect in the museum. The novel does not speculate where the road goes from there.

While Hettche relies on the museum and its extraordinary bodies to empower his interpretation of the opening of the Wall as a violent sex act, Tanja Dückers, born in West Berlin in 1968, shifts the emphasis to an individual character's confrontation with the Charité. Yet she, too, reads the collection in the context of German unification. In one section of her 1999 novel *Spielzone* a young man named Benno, born in East Berlin in 1979, breaks into the rooms of the Charité on his eighteenth birthday and frees his twin brother Leo, a baby with a huge cleft where his face should have been, from his alcohol-filled jar, bathes himself in the liquid to approximate his brother's experience, and takes the surprisingly heavy body to the nearby Tiergarten where he celebrates their birthday with candles, music and a joint as a coming of age rite. After all, the two of them shared a womb for nine months, and their eighteenth birthday is a private act of unification. As Benno breaks into the museum, he reminisces about his grandfather's war stories and the role of the Charité in the old man's recollections. Benno's grandfather, to whom no one in the family really listens, links the deformed twin brother—about



whom no one talks—to the experience of war and the bombing of Berlin. In breaking into the Charité, Benno also breaks his family's silence. For Benno's grandfather, the destruction of the Virchow collection during World War II and the "liberation" of the embryos, which according to him could be seen flooding down the street all the way to Unter den Linden, encapsulates the experience of war. Freed from their jars, the deformed children confront their parents like monsters returning to haunt the city.<sup>21</sup>

Born in 1979, Benno belongs to the third generation after World War II and the last generation with some active memories of East Berlin. He is also one of the few East German characters in the novel, marveling at the West Germans who have turned East Berlin's drab courtyards where he grew up into their preferred playground. Leo's liberation from his alcoholic prison in the former East Berlin and his transfer to West Berlin's Tiergarten is an individual and extraordinary act of reunification. United Berlin allows Benno to choose his locations and interpretations more freely than before.

Benno glances up to the brightly lit victory column and imagines how the Tiergarten is full of deformed babies sitting in trees with fine fleecy hair on their misshapen heads, all of them looking to the victory column like Leo. To the beautiful Victoria they look, who, high above the five streets that come together here, announces to them the freedom from the deficiencies of the body. (171)

In Hettche's *Nox*, the opening of the Wall reactivates the flow of monsters. Dückers incorporates the Charité's collection into her narrative mainly to tell a personal story but also to create a link between the traumatic experience of World War II in Berlin and the city's post-war history. For Benno and Leo, the winged figure on the victory column inspires a vision very different from Bismarck's military victories and the first German unification for which it stands. The museum signifies a return of the repressed in the history of the city as well as the individual family. The novel associates the Charité's human exhibits with the Nazi period, albeit in a rather unspecific way. The liberation of the twin's grotesquely deformed body serves a cathartic function for his brother

and raises hopes that a new generation, despite its reputation as superficial and apolitical, might usher in a more ethical treatment of outsiders.

*Die Letzten*, Katja Lange-Müller's latest novel (2000), makes no mention of the Charité's pathological collection but it describes a phenomenon that would have been of interest to the museum: during the course of the novel, one of the characters is delivered of a parasitical twin, a cone sized growth resembling a coconut, lodged in the muscle between his tail bone and his right hip joint. The story is set in East Berlin around 1970—at least one of the protagonists lives in Prenzlauer Berg—among a group of outsiders who work together in one of the few remaining private print shops until it is closed due to the owner's defection to Hamburg. As workers in a privately owned firm in the GDR and typesetters at the advent of computerization, the characters portrayed in *Die Letzten* are the last of their kind in more than one way. Lange-Müller describes the end of a small community long before the demise of the GDR.

The story of the parasitical twin is one of a medical mystery rather than a sensation. Fritz-Otto, one of the printers and both brother and mother to his twin "Otto-Fritz," likes to tell after a few beers how, after months of false diagnoses, X-rays brought to light the truth about an undeveloped twin in his hip, "formless, merely an irritation, a vague anxiousness and hope" (28). Since the delivery of the parasite, Fritz, who feels himself drawn to other young mothers, has lost his sex drive and instead turned to pondering his fate:

Since I had Otto or got rid of him or both I think about it every day, every hour that things might well—good for him and bad for me—have been the other way around. Then I might be the one sitting on the cupboard in Otto's living room as an anatomical preparation next to the bowl with mixed wax fruit. (31)

Unlike Benno's brother Leo about whom no one wants to talk in Tanja Dückers' novel, "Otto-Fritz" becomes a member of Fritz-Otto's family, even though it turns out that his neighbors on the mantelpiece are empty beer bottles with dried carnations in them

rather than artificial fruit. Told in retrospect after the dissolution of the GDR, the novel describes East Germany as a society where most people were reduced to the pursuit of modest private pleasures such as tending to a flower pot on the window sill and drinking cheap alcohol. The twin's stunted growth and his inability to undergo any kind of development are perhaps symbolic of the GDR as a society of unrealized potential. However, the twin, who could have ended up in the Charité instead found a home in his brother's apartment. Lange-Müller's *Nischengesellschaft* offers space for quirky individualism, humane conduct, and ample time for philosophical contemplation. Only the narrator resents Fritz's "exotic brothermotherrole" (36) which she believes is to blame for his refusal to sleep with her. *Die Letzten*, which has neither nostalgia nor complete condemnation for the society it recreates, is one of the relatively few contemporary pieces that offer a narrative return to the GDR. Telling an unusual story as if it were an ordinary occurrence, Lange-Müller gives the GDR an exotic as well as a decidedly domestic quality. In the drab atmosphere of 1970s East Berlin, the embedded twin hints at alternative possibilities that in the year 2000 can only be realized in art.<sup>22</sup>

Stephan Porombka's "Das Blutwunder von Mitte oder: wie Heinz sein Bein dazu brachte, nicht mehr zu weinen" ("The Blood Miracle of Mitte or How Heinz Made his Leg Stop Crying") is the most recent text in which the museum at the Charité plays a role. It came out in 2001 in a volume named *Traumstadtbuch: New York, Berlin, Moskau*, the title indicating in which geographic dimensions Berlin tries to figure as the centerpiece. Porombka's short story is a response to works like Hettche's *Nox* and the sensationalism on which they thrive. It chronicles the fate of a Neukölln proletarian named Heinz whose leg has to be amputated after Lutscher, his ninety pound Roman fighting dog, tore into it. Instead of being sold to a dog food company, as is customary, the leg, which not only continues to bleed but also emits weeping sounds, is given to the Medizinhistorisches Museum as an anonymous donation. Once placed into alcohol and put on display in the Charité, it quickly becomes a major attraction. The bleeding leg, it turns out, not only cures the sick but is capable of

spelling out sentences like: "Lutscher I am going to kill you, you bastard" (212) with its blood.

Porombka's satirical short story is an undisguised critique of the Charité's appropriation for the purpose of marketing the "New Berlin" and of the writers who participate in it:

The cabinet was the big attraction, long before the leg learned how to cry. Since the fall of the Wall the New Berlin got together in this center of the center, in this capital of the capital, in the new big miracle chamber, full of things in alcohol. There was something for everyone. A collection of rags, a pile of bones, a lump of self-pity, horror, and merriment mania. Readied for the adventure hunger, with Virchow's heirs at the keyboard of the *Zeitgeist*: pap smear scraper, microscope, knee drill and the forceps for the difficult birth. . . . The biggest success in the house of Virchow, however, went to literature and related activities. . . . Sentimental pieces in the style of Benn, big black epics of the East from Prenzlauer Berg, young writers read from even younger Berlin novels, a fat guy read monster passages from a novel called *Nox*. . . . (210)

Porombka's story brings together two segments of Berlin's population which have increasingly less in common in this progressively segregated city: proletarian culture in Neukölln, which is indeed home to Berlin's largest population of fighting dogs, and the so-called New Berlin in Mitte that is celebrating itself with happenings like the ones described above. The self-absorbed crowd of the New Mitte—Porombka mentions actors from Castorff's Volksbühne—only notices people like Heinz from Hermannplatz when they become part of an "event." The story ends with Heinz's visit to the Charité where he forcefully commands his "stupid leg" to shut up. The silence of this leg is no guarantee that the crowds will not line up for other weeping limbs.

Shortly after the publication of Porombka's satire, crowds did queue up in Berlin for another display of spectacular bodies. In 2001, Gunther von Hagen's controversial exhibition *Body Worlds* attracted more than 1.3 million spectators during its ten-month tenure in the German capital. Long after the wax figures of the Panoptikum have ceased to unsettle onlookers with their real-

ness, *Body Worlds* enticed visitors with preparations of real human corpses and organs transformed into a plastic-like substance with the help of a special technique developed by von Hagen. Unlike the preparations on view in the Charité, von Hagen's corpses are arranged in poses that consciously copy classical representations of the human body in the fine arts.<sup>23</sup> A female corpse, for instance, imitates posture and gesture of Botticelli's "Venus." The debate surrounding *Body Worlds* focused on the blurred boundaries between science, art and entertainment which, critics insisted, violated the human sanctity of those put on display. Committed to commerce as well as education, von Hagen, who describes his craft in deliberately vague terms as neither art nor science, is heir to the tradition of the Charité as well as the Panoptikum.<sup>24</sup> In a separate room of the Berlin exhibition, von Hagen displayed malformed fetuses in formaldehyde "for the education of pregnant women." A sign cautioned visitors that these particular exhibits might be disturbing. The fetuses, which stem from traditional pathological collections, apparently did not merit artistic presentation and, implied in the appeal to pregnant women, their existence should and can be prevented. Like the midget vis-à-vis the princess in Velásquez' "Las Meninas," their bizarrely shaped bodies serve to enhance the beauty of von Hagen's body sculptures.

Other artists did not refuse the aesthetic challenge posed by the embryos. In 1995, Alexander Polzin, born in 1973 in East Berlin, created a series of 20 paintings depicting fetuses from the Charité collection. Exhibited first in Israel, then in Berlin, reproductions of these images are included in the volume *Abgetrieben*, a collection of stories and essays about "monstrosities" edited by Sander Gilman. In his introduction Gilman insists that the deformed fetuses preserved in alcohol must be interpreted in the context of the Shoah. Not only because corpses of Nazi victims were used for scientific purposes at the Charité but because, in the twentieth century, their unviable bodies remind us of those lives that were deemed unfit to be lived. Polzin's series, titled "Monster," does not make direct references to the Shoah but it makes a statement about dignity and the representation of ex-

traordinary bodies. Polzin's images free the fetuses from their jars and place their pastel colored bodies against a background of irregularly formed black and grey stripes whose resemblance to meandering riverbeds evokes the double meaning of the volume's title: "aborted" as well as "drifted away" to an indeterminate location. Some of Polzin's paintings show the same exhibits as the photographs reproduced in Peter Krietsch's volume about the Virchow collection.<sup>25</sup> Where the presumably unmediated quality of the photographic images exposes the embryos to the viewer's voyeuristic scrutiny, Polzin's "monsters" no longer figure in an "Ästhetik des Häßlichen" and have become aesthetic objects in their own right. Berlin-based artist Volker März explored a similar subject when he exhibited about one hundred hand-sized clay figures in the museum's former lecture hall (Hörsaalruine) adjacent to the Medizinhistorisches Museum in the early summer of 2002 titled "Der Mensch ist, was ihm fehlt" ("The human being is what he lacks"), after an essay by the French philosopher George Bataille. Created specifically for this particular space, the exhibition showed human figures whose sexual organs do not match the rest of their bodies together with others whose teratomata outdo the human exhibits next door in variation and form. Adult figures rather than infants, März's creations hint at the lives these embryos might have lived. Arranged in groups of three or four, the figures overcome the isolation of the display jar.<sup>26</sup> Neither Polzin nor März normalize the bodies on exhibit in the Charité. By moving them out of a museum that does not reflect on its own history into the realm of the aesthetic they force the viewer to question the treatment of people with extraordinary bodies.<sup>27</sup> Berlin is not the only city with a pathological collection, but the Charité is specific to Berlin. Through the use of visual elements and location both works of art maintain a close connection to the Medizinisch-Pathologisches Museum.

I do not mean to suggest that the collection at the Charité hands us the interpretative key to contemporary Berlin. But the references to this and similar institutions in recent works—to which the collection's notoriety in 1990s event-*Kultur* certainly contributed—show that boundary formations are a vital aspect of



thinking about Berlin. The texts discussed here also confirm that the intricate relationship between the body and the city calls for new interpretations when a city changes as dramatically as Berlin in the last decade. The extremes embodied by the exhibits in the Charité hint at the magnitude of the task and at the deeply ambiguous nature of Berlin's identity not just today but also historically. The growing economic segregation of Berlin and the restoration of the public transportation system, the reprivatization of entire districts and the loss of public space have changed the face of the city and the living conditions of those who inhabit it. The philosopher Karl Rosenkranz referred his readers to Cruikshank's drawings when he argued that cities and bodies reflect one another. Remnants of the nineteenth century and as such messengers from the period whose urban structure today's city planners seek to recreate, the malformed embryos in Berlin's reconstructed heart are a reminder that flesh and stone still hold up a mirror to each other.

## Notes

1 For instance, Perikles Monioudis, *Das Palladium* (2000); Christoph Bauer, *Jetzt stillen wir unseren Hunger* (2001) and Richard Wagner, *In der Hand der Frauen* (1995).

2 Richard Wagner. "Die geteilte Zeit." In: Richard Wagner, *Schwarze Kreide. Gedichte*. Frankfurt: Luchterhand, 1991. 86. All translations from the German are mine.

3 Schneider's description echoes Josef Roth's observation dating from 1924: "Potsdamer Platz looks like a big miserable gash in the city. And day after day, night after night, workers dig in this wound." Quoted in Bienert, 137.

4 See Welker, Springer, 103-04.

5 For an extensive discussion of the representation and treatment of people with physical deformations see Fiedler.

6 See also Zimmermann.

7 See Rosenkranz *Topographie*. The lectures attest to Rosenkranz's familiarity with and appreciation of the two cities.

8 Most notably Georg Heym's poem "Gott der Stadt." See Hermand.

9 This essay is reprinted under the title "Im Museum der Mißbildungen" in Grünbein, *Galilei*. Quotations are from the latter edition.

10 See Bienert. About one half of the figures displayed in the Berliner Panoptikum originated in Castans Panoptikum. Schimm, "Panische Optiken," 150.

11 On the cooperation between Charité and Panoptikum see Rothfels. Virtually all "exotic" people examined by Virchow and his colleagues were on display in one of the two panopticons; see, for instance, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 24 (1892), 583 or *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 39 (1907), 28. The contributors to the *Zeitschrift* insist on their scientific interest, often debunking popular myths. In other instances, such as in the case of the "Indian 'ape-man,'" the author protests against the "revolting manner of display." *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 27 (1895) 27

12 See also his piece "Die Versteigerung." In Kisch's satirical version of the event, the ax murderer Sternickel fetches 12,000 Mark while the Goethe statue goes to a soap manufacturer for 900 marks. In an article titled "Die zusammengewachsenen Schwestern" he defended the conjoined sisters' right to privacy and sexual fulfillment.

13 Monstrous births have been collected since at least the 18th century. They were coveted items for *Wunderkammern* where they were displayed as proof of nature's divine ways and admired for their beauty. For the eighteenth-century French writer and philosopher Louis-Sébastien Mercier, for instance, these "games of nature" were a revelation of nature's most profound intelligence. In the nineteenth century the approach became increasingly scientific, turning the wondrous "games of nature" into irritants to the system because they defied classification. In the twentieth century, the approach becomes even more medicalized with attempts to surgically normalize such bodies. See Hagner.

14 In the spring and summer of 2002 the Berliner Medizinhistorisches Museum celebrated the 100th anniversary of Virchow's death with a series of public lectures held in the *Hörsaalruine*, the preserved remnants of Virchow's anatomical theatre.



15 In this essay, published two years after the opening of the museum, Virchow does not mention the fetuses at all.

16 The title of Krietsch and Dietel's work emphasizes the collection's origins in the *Wunderkammern* of the eighteenth century.

17 *Theatrum naturae et artis. Wunderkammern des Wissens*. The exhibition ran from December 2000 to March 2001. <[www2.rz.hu-berlin.de/hzk/theatrum](http://www2.rz.hu-berlin.de/hzk/theatrum)>.

18 In *Moskau* 205-16.

19 Hettche's description of the museum and some of his interpretations resemble the narrative in Krietsch/Dietel.

20 The association continues. The Swedish writer Aris Fioretos contributed an essay "Brief aus Sankt Petersburg" to an issue of the magazine *Literaturen* dedicated to the topic "Ich und die Stadt." In addition to touring Vladimir Nabokov's birth house, he visits Czar Peter's *Wunderkammer* and shortly thereafter witnesses a murder.

21 See also Rabinovici. In this short story, the Austrian writer Rabinovici complicates the idea of revenge as the scientist Wellner, himself misshapen, despised and eager to avenge himself, is killed by a female fetus who escaped from her jar.

22 In Christa Wolf's most recent novel, set in Berlin, the protagonist experiences the end of the GDR as a severe physical illness.

23 See Krüger-Fürhoff 103f.

24 "Skinless Wonders" gives a good overview over the debate.

25 Picture number 11 is the artist's rendition of the photograph on page 103 in Krietsch, *Pathologisch-anatomisches Cabinet*.

26 I thank Volker März for generously sharing information and visual materials with me.

27 In 2002, Berlin's Georg Kolbe Museum featured yet more responses to Virchow's preparations and the tradition of putting pathology on display in an exhibition titled "Wächserne Identitäten: Figürliche Wachsplastik am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts." <[www.georg-kolbe-museum.de](http://www.georg-kolbe-museum.de)>.

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